

Missoulian

MARCH

'Idle No More' march in Missoula draws attention to aboriginal rights



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There was method to the march across the Higgins Avenue Bridge and back Friday afternoon.

The "Idle No More" protest movement that began a month ago among First Nations people in Canada hit close to home and backed up traffic in downtown Missoula.

Shortly after 1 p.m. more than 200 men, women and children from every tribe in Montana, and others from beyond, walked in the southbound lanes across the Higgins Avenue Bridge behind a line of drummers and singers.

Then they turned around and walked back north to their starting spot at Caras Park, where they concluded the rally with a traditional round dance.

"This turned out better than I thought," announced Craig Pablo at the end. "I encourage you to not let this die. This is just the beginning."

Social media vehicles were used to organize the demonstration. It became especially poignant Friday morning when Shanley Swanson of Missoula posted a photo on Facebook depicting the heartbreaking march across the Higgins bridge by Chief Charlo and the remnants of the Bitterroot Salish en route to the Jocko Reservation in 1891.

"I didn't want to polarize this as just a Salish or Kootenai event or whatever," said Pablo, one of dozens of descendants of Chief Charlo at the rally. "But that's the same bridge that our ancestors were marched across and forced onto the reservation."

"They were forced north along the bridge, so today, at least for me, by going south along the bridge I'm closer to my ancestors, closer to what they had and what they wanted for us."

"This bridge is very significant," agreed Dean Nicolai of Arlee, who helped with traffic control during the march. "Children were tied to horses when they came across the bridge (in 1891), and it's significant for us to go the other direction. And we're always going in a circle, so we came right back down here (to Caras Park). That's the round dance."

Missoula was one of more than 130 cities and towns to join the Idle No More movement in a

global day of action.

Friday marked the one-month anniversary of Theresa Spence's hunger strike in Ottawa. Spence, chief of the Attawapiskat First Nation of northern Ontario, is protesting recent abuses of indigenous treaty rights by the Canadian government.

Her demonstration has touched a nerve on many other fronts, and those who showed up at Friday's event in Missoula saw plenty of significance for Idle No More in Montana. Many of them were also involved in a pre-Christmas round dance flash mob in Southgate Mall, and are expected to show up next Friday in Pablo for another demonstration.

An Idle No More action was held at the state Capitol in Helena last Monday on Inauguration Day and in Bozeman on Friday as well.

"This is a call to come out and do our part," April Charlo, a great-granddaughter of Chief Charlo, said in Missoula. "We're here to protect the land and water, and this isn't just a Canadian issue. This incited us to have the warriors in all of us to come out and to say, yeah, we are here and we're here to protect the land and the water."

"It's not just a movement, it's an awakening," said Pablo.

Idle No More and the unrest among Inuit, Metis and First Nations people in Canada was sparked after Prime Minister Stephen Harper and others in federal government advanced a series of omnibus bills seen as threatening aboriginal treaty rights. Spence began her hunger strike on Dec. 11 to draw attention to what she sees as the government's pro-oil and industry agenda.

Spence has signed off on her will and is prepared to die, it was reported this week. She wasn't at a conference with Harper on Friday in Ottawa. Harper met with several native leaders but chiefs from Ontario and Manitoba boycotted the meeting.

In Missoula, April Charlo took note of the wide array of Indian nations represented in the walk across the bridge. Beyond the local tribes there were people from Navajo, Cherokee, Lakota Sioux and Canadian tribes, among others.

"All the people that came here today at one time were probably enemies," she said. "We used to fight over hunting grounds and things like that. We fought and battled each other in a matter of survival, and today we all came not to battle each other but to come together in unity."

Participants pointed to the current controversy over a proposed water rights compact between the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes, and state and federal governments. It's rooted in the Hellgate Treaty of 1855.

Traffic was blocked or slowed on Higgins Avenue for roughly eight minutes in each direction during the 15-minute walk. The organizers had no parade permits, but law officers stayed back and monitored the march.

Cpl. Paul Kelly of the Missoula Police Department said a few complaints were fielded.

"But it was a fairly short walk," Kelly said. "It's one of those things where you've got to lay out a little bit. Technically, it's against the law blocking traffic, but we balance that with people's freedom of speech. We don't want to cause more harm than good."

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